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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Bartram, R. (2005). Nature, art and indifference. *Cultural Geographies*, *12*(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1191/1474474005eu320oa

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Nature, art and indifference

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This paper explores possibilities associated with contemporary explanations of nature through a consideration of the nature-based art of Damien Hirst. I argue that this art poses fresh and challenging questions with the potential to destabilize dominant explanations of nature. His art affords nature the transformative qualities that rupture both its unproblematical differentiation from society and the belief that nature can be represented as an objectified truth through art. We can best explore these ideas in relation to Hirst's art by 'using' an interpretative strategy akin to Baudrillard's 'mysterious rules of indifference' – the exploration of art's capacity to activate and trigger metaphors, motifs and plays on meaning that form the ebb and flow of the cultural sign system, where attention is paid to the relational order *between* the components of meaning, rather than the material composition of specific objects. I argue that we should reconceptualize nature in terms of its alterity and undecidability, cultivating explanations based on indifference so that we do not succumb to the seduction of locating the meaning of nature.

In this paper I want to explore the possibilities of discharging some of the tendencies associated with contemporary explanations of nature. To do this, I am not going to turn to the post-structuralist critique of social and cultural theory that appears to be unfolding in geography.[1] Instead, I will turn to the contemporary nature-based art of Damien Hirst, the British artist associated with the sobriquet 'Young British Artists' or 'Brit Art'.[2] I argue that Hirst's art does not attempt to appeal to a generalized sense of what nature might mean (or, indeed, what art might mean), but instead strikes out beyond the conceptual limits of nature. That is, Hirst's art forces us to question dominant modes of explanation used to comprehend nature. In the realms of academic debate for example, the dominant mode of explanation has been typified by dialectical enframement. 'Nature–society' dialectics have been employed to equate the representation and meaning of nature with the ordering principles of commodification and capital accumulation. It is a mode of explanation that has left us with two distinct impressions: that there is a diversity of contested natures,[3] and that nature is nothing more than a capital accumulation strategy because of its supposed role in the material reproduction of society.[4] Thus, it has been argued that nature can be found 'deeply embedded' or 'ingrained' in the grand narratives of capitalism and modernity.[5] Whilst there are notable critiques that counter this dominant mode of explanation,[6] there has still been a tendency to assume that nature has an original, unitary condition that defines its reality, or that there is a version of nature that is distinct from its social construction and its formation of social identities. Subsequently, nature–society dialectics have never been far away from the mode of explanation.

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Hirst's nature-based art poses fresh and challenging questions that potentially destabilize dominant explanations of nature. His art affords nature the transformative qualities that rupture both its unproblematical differentiation from society and the belief that nature can be represented as an objectified truth through art. Importantly, it allows us to think of nature, not as an ontological world on which we impose value and meaning, but as something that we continually configure through the production of images and ideas. By interpreting his work, we can begin to conceive of a natural world that is not fixed or differentiated from society and culture, but *indifferent* to them. Nature in this way of thinking is not so much a fixed point in the polarized nature–society frame, but a circulatory process of intensity and affects that are provisional and emergent in their configuration of meaning. We can best explore this idea in relation to Hirst's art by 'using' an interpretative strategy akin to Baudrillard's 'mysterious rules of indifference'.[7] The mysterious rules of indifference allow Hirst's art to be understood in terms of its ability to activate and trigger metaphors, motifs and plays on meaning that form the ebb and flow of the cultural sign system. More precisely, the mysterious rules of indifference emphasize the relational order *between* the components of meaning, rather than the material composition of specific objects.[8] Or, as Baudrillard explains, the mysterious rules of indifference allow us to understand the production of meaning in terms of the matrix of the appearance of things, and the matrix of the distribution of forms.[9] So rather than assume that art (or any social and cultural form) can be a reflection of nature, or even a component part of its social construction, art becomes a new *capacity* for nature. However, the 'rules' in the mysterious rules of indifference are not rules that can be applied according to *a priori* analytical frameworks and explanatory conventions. Indeed, the rules disrupt the notion of there being a unified position from which to command interpretation because it is assumed that this cannot be preconditioned. Instead, the rules are subject to reformulation through the practice of interpretation.[10] Whilst this creates a deliberately unstable formula for the interpretation of Hirst's art, in practice it allows us to see the failure in attempting to 'locate' meaning that enables the distinction between nature and art, or nature and society. It means that in practice the interpretation of Hirst's art is like working with the *indifferent* signs of nature, because there is no dialectical polarity with which to reformulate distinctive versions of nature, either with reference to the ontological or unitary meaning of nature or by opposing versions of nature's social construction.

In terms of interpretive strategy, this leaves us with the task of describing Hirst's art in terms of its momentum or pace of revision, and the unpredictable ways in which this happens. In projecting nature as a capacity rather than an objectified truth, as simulacra that blur boundaries between the real and the virtual, and as active and transformative in its relation to meaning, we necessarily free nature from its conceptual anchorage in social and cultural difference.

This paper will begin by chronicling the career of Damien Hirst and will make reference to the development of style, form and content in his work. I will consider Hirst's preoccupation with the themes of birth, death, love and life which have been worked into his nature-based art. I then discuss the manner in which Hirst's work prompts reflection on the perfected yet generalized 'signs' of nature, and the irreconcilable

contradictions brought about by the co-presence of real and virtual natures. I do not intend to undermine nature's reality, nor to suggest that nature has lost its social and cultural potency. On the contrary, through an interpretation of Hirst's art I intend to argue that the meaning of nature has intensified because it has been endlessly perfected in relation to an idealized version of itself, through scientific, technological and media reproduction.[11] I explore how Hirst's art mimics nature's 'minimalist' status and high point of definition, and how the glass vitrines that accommodate Hirst's work parody the spectatorial traits associated with nature.

I then direct attention to Hirst's nature-based conceptualization of death, and particularly Western culture's denial of its erratic tendencies. I am particularly interested in exploring how perfected ideas of nature find little room for unpredictable events such as death, and how the matrix and distribution of meaning in contemporary culture can detach representations of death, indeed nature itself, from their own referents. An important aspect of this discussion is conceptualizing Hirst's art as being 'active' and at work: Hirst uses live insects in one installation, and his installations in general are designed to assault the viewer's senses. Hirst demonstrates how nature can be conceptualized in terms of multiple trajectories of sensory perception, recollection, memory and affectivity.[12]

In the penultimate section of this paper, I evaluate the destabilizing influences of Hirst's work by considering some of its critical reception, the role of hype and the 'wow' factor that his work is supposedly indicative of, and how Hirst has resisted attempts to be pinned down according to a specific artistic genre.

Damien Hirst, unforeseen spin

Damien Hirst became widely known in the 1990s as an artist and a curator for exhibitions such as *Freeze*, staged at Surrey Docks, London, in 1988 and *Some went mad, some ran away*, staged at the Serpentine Gallery, London, in 1994. His international reputation was greatly enhanced at the Venice Biennial in 1993, where the installation *Mother and child divided* (Figure 1) was exhibited. After winning the Turner Prize in 1995, Hirst took part in the 1997 *Sensations* exhibition, first staged at the Royal Academy of Art in London and then at the Brooklyn Museum, New York. The controversies surrounding the exhibition prompted television and newspaper journalists to write features on his lifestyle, and not simply his art. More than 100 000 people attended the exhibition titled *Models, methods, approaches, assumptions, results and findings* held at the Gagosian Museum, New York, and the popularity of his current exhibition at the new Saatchi Gallery in London make declarations about his artistic bankruptcy look rather premature.[13]

Hirst's numerous detractors have suggested that his work is highly derivative, and that there is little more to his work than tabloid and populist hype.[14] For Stallabrass, Hirst is simply a vampire drawing lifeblood from the already anaemic body of British working class culture – even the well-publicized 'laddish' acts of behaviour are highly contrived and designed to court controversy.[15] Other critical appraisals have pointed to the patronage and business acumen of Charles Saatchi as the principal explanation for the inflated prices that Hirst's work now commands. As art critic Edward Lucie-Smith

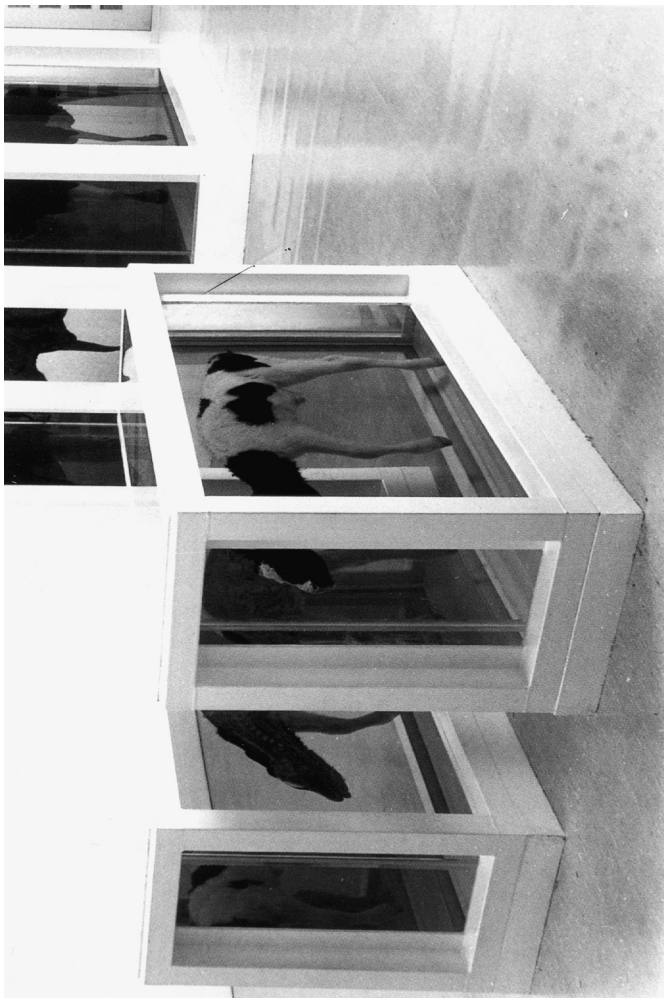

FIGURE 1 *Mother and child divided* (reproduced by kind permission of Damien Hirst and Science)

has suggested, the publication on British art entitled the *Saatchi Decade* seems to imply that the important art of the last ten years can be referred to just one man's investment.[16]

Although Hirst has suffered at the hands of the media, he has still pandered to the mechanisms of celebrity and fame by broadening his interests. In 1997 his 'autobiography' was published, *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now*, and in 2001 he co-authored *On the way to work* with George Burns.[17] He has also designed album covers, directed a short film, invested in a London restaurant business that utilized Hirst's decorative style and recorded two pop singles with musicians and actors that form part of his close-knit social clique.

Despite the ongoing media and public pressure to become more artistically productive, and perhaps more thematically varied,[18] Hirst's instincts have been to persist with the themes and techniques that were evident in the formative years of his career. His installations and paintings have consistently operated through a thematic matrix of birth, death, love and life, and often through nature-based subject matter. There is nothing particularly extraordinary about these themes, or the fact that Hirst prefers to interpret them through nature. However, Hirst has managed to give these fairly conventional artistic themes an unforeseen spin. He has become adept at activating the reconfiguration of the contemporary signifiers of nature, although this has often been mistakenly referred to as a parody of Duchamp's 'ready-made' art. This ascription implies that there is a greater purpose to Hirst's art. For Hirst, art can not be so readily located: exhibitions and individual works of art might instigate the revision of ideas through bursts of interpretive and creative energies, but beyond that, meaning and signification take random trajectories that could well defy the interests of curators and artists alike. Thus, he once claimed that curating an exhibition was like watching objects proliferate through 'additional' interpretation.[19]

Whilst it has often been claimed that Hirst's art confronts or reflects the 'big' or 'tough' themes of birth, love, life and death,[20] Hirst himself has often refused to confirm or deny such interpretations. If the themes are addressed in his work, then they emerge in multiple and varied forms, from the controversial visceral works involving dead animals such as pigs, sheep, cows and sharks suspended in formaldehyde, to the medicine cabinets, ashtrays and human anatomical structures. His 'spot' and 'spin' paintings perhaps allude to the same ideas, although the chemical and pharmaceutical titles, rather than the content alone, help to conjure up such thoughts.

Nature, even better than the real thing

Hirst's natural history installations can appear as a play or visual pun on the idea of nature: he works with the most frequently duplicated and highly visible ideas of nature as if to make them all the more transparent. In *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living*, he has suspended a tiger shark in a vitrine of formaldehyde (Figure 2). Like the various other animals that have been vitrified by Hirst, such as sheep, cows and pigs, the shark is shocking in the sense that it is 'real', but it has a

FIGURE 2 *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living* (reproduced by kind permission of the Saatchi Gallery, London)

crispness and precision that suggests that it is more like an advertising image. Its high definition inspires thoughts of the 3-D glass-wearing visual experience presented in the movie *Jaws 3-D*.

The neat, clean-cut lines of the vitrine itself enhance a sense of the 'suspension' of the image: it is free of its natural surroundings – and we might add, its referents – and yet can be viewed in close-up and from a multiplicity of angles. Like many spatial artists, Hirst likes to work on an individual sense of embodiment and the capacity for proprioception,[21] as his remarks about the shark installation suggest:

> I like the idea of a thing to describe a feeling. And a shark is frightening . . . it can kill and eat you.[22] The shark looks alive, you expect it to look at you and yet it's dead. It looks like it's in its natural surroundings and yet it clearly isn't. We see more of the shark like this, understand it more and yet we've had to kill it in order to achieve this.[23]

The shark, as with the other natural history installations, is less an imitation of nature than a hologram version of nature itself. Hirst does not proclaim this as a new vision of nature, nor does he seek reconciliation with nature in the spirit of the Romantic art tradition. There is no suggestion that the vitrified animals are symbolic of a metaphysical, transcendent order. For Hirst, nature is hyper-realized, 'perfected' by the gradual elimination of defects and impurities, and by its endless duplication through science, technology and the media. Hirst appears to be mimicking nature's 'minimalist', banal status in Western culture where its plight becomes all too apparent through momentary glimpses of documentary film, cinema, advertising and consumer good packaging. In the installation *Mother and child divided* (Figure 1), Hirst entices us to think about how this signification process works. The installation comprises a cow and calf cut lengthways so that each half carcass makes up four separate vitrines. The grotesque beauty of this work lies in the invitation to the spectator to participate, to wander between the divided animal bodies. Critics have tried to draw *Mother and child divided* into the art-historical traditions of the Madonna and child, and have even pointed to the installation's anti-English pastoral resonances.[24] Yet Hirst only wishes to assert its kitsch, trivial banality by declaring, 'It's just nothing. It doesn't mean anything.'[25] As with nature itself, *Mother and child divided* might lure us into the search for specific meaning, but there is no *thing* there to see – or at least, there is too much to see because of the constellation of signs that are in a constant state of becoming. This does not mean that nature has lost its symbolic power. On the contrary, the meaning of nature proliferates, and is more capable than ever of inspiring the illusion of its inherent sanctity. We only have to recall the incredible repercussions when British national newspapers published half-page colour images of an angel-white calf called Phoenix, standing over its slaughtered mother at the height of the foot-and-mouth crisis in April 2001. Images of the forlorn calf caused widespread anger and upset, and propelled an already emotionally charged issue to new levels of public anxiety. Within twenty-four hours of publication, the government made a U-turn on culling practices. This is not so much confirmation that a politically sensitive issue found potency in an image as the confirmation that the signs of nature have an infinite capacity to connect and reconfigure to other signs.

In this sense, the signification of nature has reached a point of high definition, but it remains in a state of symbolic generality. Nature is both explicit and seductive, yet detached from relative value and reference to the real. Some observers such as Paul Virilio find 'brevity of the sign' problematical because it implies that contemporary culture has slipped into the constant displacement of 'direct observation', or the truth in what one sees,[26] or that the transformation of the object of vision into 'information' has denigrated the object's cultural and historical specificity.[27] What Hirst's work encourages us to think is that brevity of the sign of nature is symptomatic of the fatal tendencies of the cultural sign system. This extends to Hirst's belief that the installations work equally well without the vitrified animals because the vitrines and the formaldehyde themselves convey the same sorts of ideas about nature, only in 'shorthand'.[28] They communicate ideas about Western culture's disastrous preservationist tendencies. Rather like the paradox of using highly toxic liquids such as formaldehyde to preserve life forms, Western culture appeases itself with conservation ideals that fashion 'perfected' notions of nature that subsequently enact the final act of severance from nature's reality.

It has been suggested that Hirst's formaldehyde installations parody popular British taxidermy. For Brian Sewell, installations such as *This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed at home* and *Mother and child divided* supposedly recall the stuffed pike, rabbits and hares found in British pubs, museum displays and private collections.[29] But I would argue that Hirst's installations inspire more obvious connections to the virtual, technical and scientific view of nature that appears as a recurrent theme in contemporary culture. The animals in these installations have been bisected perfectly; there is no hint of blood or disembowelment to suggest brutality. Instead, the installations attest to the scientific and clinical formality typified by Western culture's fascination with genetic and cryogenic research and modern medicine. Even the vitrines suggest bleak laboratories, life support machines and medical survival. They are cold and hygienic, reminding us of the scientific and medical obsession with categorization of the natural world in which the chaotic and dysfunctional are not allowed to exist. The vitrines parody the idea of nature being interpreted through systems, processes and equilibriums that all have their rational, scientific normativities.

At the same time, the installations play on the confusion over 'real' and virtual versions of nature. The simple and deliberate use of real rather than artificial animals has managed to heighten sensitivities about the work and has generated the kind of emotionally charged responses that are impossible to reconcile.[30] The animal rights protests at the *Sensations* exhibition in New York and London only confirm this view. However, Hirst used real animals to make the art more real, to extend levels of morbid curiosity in dead animals presented in contexts that we are not quite prepared for.[31] The installations remind us that real and virtual images and experiences of nature have become indistinguishable in recent years. This is no better illustrated than by recalling that Hirst's emergence as an artist coincided with the London Natural History Museum's decision to replace the stuffed animals accumulated and displayed over the last century with computer simulations. Clearly, 'real animals' no longer suffice to meet public expectations of natural history. Nature's reality is better served by virtual means.

The vitrines themselves are 'at work', activating and cultivating meaning that necessarily disrupts conventional understandings of nature. They play on ideas of distance and spectacle, the important philosophical grounds on which nature has been conceptualized.[32] The vitrines make the viewer aware of the act of viewing, of the spectatorial traits that are associated with nature. The glass cases and the formaldehyde liquid allow perfect visibility and viewing from all angles, and from all distances. They create a viewing space which is an almost pure visual space that is conducive to movement: the viewer circles around the vitrine quite freely, moving closer and then further away, without ever being allowed physically to touch the preserved animal. In *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living* (Figure 2), the combination of bulging glass case and formaldehyde liquid refracts the view of the shark as you walk around the tank. Momentarily, the shark appears to move, causing you to glance back and forward to confirm that this is just an optical illusion. It is in performing this movement that you become aware of how nature is enacted through visuality,[33] and how visual space enables nature to become more accessible, yet more prolific, in the trajectories of sensory perception, recollection, memory and affectivity. Hirst's installations, then, allow us to see nature for itself, as seductive and photogenic, and conducive to the pursuit of definitive viewing angles and close-ups, and where the comprehension of nature is allied to the creation of new visualizing technologies. As Virilio and others have long argued, it is visual technologies that have created the sight and site of nature's 'new' realities,[34] as can be most readily witnessed in the development of wildlife documentary 'cams' that capture nature at its most natural, from every conceivable angle.

Nature, mock shocks and death

Hirst's installation work is shocking, conceptually, in a manner that has been attributed to referential, avant-garde tendencies.[35] But it is a kind of 'mock shock' that reminds us of Benjamin's argument that beauty and repulsion, disgust and pleasure can be easily aligned in the same image.[36] If it is that we are meant to feel uncomfortable in the presence of Hirst's art,[37] then it is perhaps the unaccustomed and disturbing context to his work that draws our attention, where proximity to the vitrified animals makes for a harrowing experience. As Hirst has stated:

> It's like being interested in nature's more grim details. . .like the best nature programmes: animals destroy each other to stay alive, we're interested in it, but only at a distance.[38]

Hirst's work deals with one of the most fundamental aspects of nature – death. For Hirst, death has become 'hi-tech', where medicine and life-support machines simply draw out the process. His installations do not offer an alternative to this. Instead, they encourage us to think about Western culture's fascination with medical science and the attempts to deny life's fundamental transience. According to Hirst, death is unacceptable in Western culture – we tend to deal with it by detachment or amusement.[39] Hirst

offers a pertinent yet succinct view of Western culture's confused responses to death in relation to the shark in formaldehyde:

> I like ideas of trying to understand the world by taking things out of the world. You kill things to look at them. You have to preserve a shark in liquid which looks very similar to its natural habitat. It has to be that size. You expect it to look back at you. I hope at first glance it will look alive. It could have to do with the obsession with trying to make the dead live or the living live forever.[40]

Hirst has alternative takes on death: in *A thousand years* (Figure 3), he prompts us to think about Western culture's obsession with the 'end' of nature, and specifically the illusion that the end of nature can be forestalled. Here, the end is played out over and over again: there is no beginning or end, just a series of bodily functions. *A thousand years* is a sealed-off, two-metre-high vitrine that presents birth, reproduction and death played out by the maggots, flies, cow's head and an ultraviolet 'insectocutor'. Importantly, it can only be experienced in the present and in person, it has no second life in the media, only as an idea through the cultural sign system. Through the media, it becomes something additional or supplementary. Seeing it in the flesh is like experiencing the exhilaration of waiting for something terrible to happen. The smell, even with an artificial cow's head, is intensely pungent. The smell of rotting cow flesh causes most spectators to grimace and wince as they approach the case. Morbid fascination encourages most people to follow the flight paths of individual blue bottle flies, to see if they survive the insectocutor. The vitrine is smeared in blood, and there is a thick blanket of dead flies on the floor. It reminds us that nature's reality can be grim and gory, and that despite Western culture's obsession with longevity, and with cryogenic and genetic research, the moment of death is a completely random and sometimes unpleasant process.

This installation is significant in terms of its activation of the senses. Quite simply, it is a piece of art that jumps out and grabs you.[41] To experience this installation is to become aware of the various 'valves' of human sensation that can be released. Through this release we can comprehend nature as the connectivity between the object of nature and our sensory being. If nature can be forged through the co-joining of subject and object and the images and experiences that unfold, then nature is only ever in our/the the making.[42] This interpretation throws into question a fundamental principle associated with the dominant explanation of nature: that nature's reality is contained within its materiality, or – to put it simply – that there is a truth in the object of nature. *A thousand years* allows us to think again about the truth in nature's materiality. Indeed, Hirst has played with this notion by replacing a real cow's head with a prosthetic head, and smearing it with dog food and tomato ketchup to keep the installation experience alive. But the power of this piece of art does not rely on the use of real or artificial cow body parts; it relies on the sensory capacities of the viewer, and specifically on what can be termed the 'being' of the sensible: the ability to anticipate experiences of the natural world such as pungent smells or gory scenes of death, but not having the capacity to predict how the sense might unfold.[43]

FIGURE 3 *A thousand years* (reproduced by kind permission of the Saatchi Gallery, London)

Nature, art and the aesthetic illusion

Hirst's work eludes conventional art criticism. It is easier to speculate about what an installation might *do* rather than to suggest what it might represent. Even the unwieldy titles of his work, designed possibly to explain things, fail to ground meaning. It then becomes a more fruitful task to think of Hirst as attempting to direct artistic, aesthetic and sensory energy, rather than paint notional realities. Inadvertently, critics have stumbled upon the precise value of Hirst's art by attempting to dismiss his installations as providing nothing more than a 'wow' factor.[44] This form of reasoning is built on the premise that art should only be considered of value if it demands more complex or detailed explanation and understanding. Put simply, the wow factor is not enough, and it reduces art to nothing more significant than popular cultural form. But there is a power, longevity and transformative quality in the wow factor of Hirst's art. For commentators such as Jean Baudrillard, it is these qualities that ultimately define the significance of the artist.[45] To begin with, Hirst's art emulates the precise role of nature in its contemporary mediated form. Nature has become 'sensational' through documentary film and photography, and even through conservation theme parks such as the Eden Project in Cornwall.[46] More specifically, Hirst's conceptual art prompts us to think about the connections and relationships forged by nature's proliferation through the cultural sign system, and specifically the form of ambiguity that is implied by Hirst's challenge to nature's reality through the use of real animals as art. His conceptual art undertakes a kind of aesthetic 'reversal' that destabilizes notions of nature and draws attention to nature's transformative consistency. And despite the best efforts of some art critics, Hirst's interpretation of nature cannot be pinned down.[47] Indeed, he responds to questions about his work in almost entirely pragmatic terms, to reinforce a sense of the lack of philosophical and aesthetic anchorage. He projects himself as ambivalent and a little surly in interview and chooses to discuss colour, content and scale rather than embark on the intellectualizing of his work – such approaches are 'boring'.[48] Accurate interview transcripts read like a mixture of incoherent anecdotes and aphorisms spun between glottal stops. This tempts critics into employing their own arcane language born of the codes and conventions of traditional art criticism, although these are the very things that nullify comments on his work. Instead, Hirst prefers a form of populist interpretation that he calls 'description'.[49]

> I want the viewer to do a lot of work and feel uncomfortable. They should be made to feel responsible for their own view of the world rather than look at an artist's view and be critical of it.[50]

Even when he is drawn to make reference to the intellectual and artistic context to his work, he makes a statement and then adds the proviso, 'Well, sometimes I would say that'[51] as if to suggest a constant flux in his ideas, which itself denies any normative position. For some commentators, this attitude is indicative of the recent 'dumbing' down of art by 'Young British Artists'.[52] But by serving up wonderfully complex banalities about his work, Hirst allows meaning and signification to escape the clutches

of conventional art criticism. As he has continued to remind us, his work is 'bright and zany – but there's fuck all in it'.[53]

So what we are left with is not a form of art that purports to represent nature's reality, or even its demise. What Hirst's art encourages us to think about is the manner in which nature is simultaneously perfected and duplicated in Western culture. Indeed, the nature-based subject matter that he chooses to present as his art already speaks to us through the cultural sign system because of its prevalence. Rather like Baudrillard's notion of simulation,[54] Hirst presents the idea that we are approaching the absolute limits of nature's authentic representation, the stage of its high definition. The paradox of this is that the closer we come to perfecting the image of nature, of adding to the real, the more nature's power of illusion is lost. Or to be more precise, the power of illusion has become just too powerful.

Nature, art and indifference

To propel some of the ideas discussed here yet further, I would like to talk about nature and art simultaneously, and refer to 'nature-art' forthwith. Nature-art cannot be separated out into autonomous entities that figure within the rigid geometries of 'dominant' structures of power, where the gallery or the national park, for example, reinforces established patterns of consumption and production. As I have tried to suggest here, we do not gain 'deeper' understandings or acquire an additional purchase on nature-art by simply following the fixed points of an explanatory structure. We are following the rules of a well-practised analytical game. But as Baudrillard has reminded us many times in the last ten years, we need to play the whole game,[55] to go beyond the meta-narratives that no longer serve to answer questions that we might ask. Instead, we might try to understand nature-art in terms of transformative energy flows, rather than as a reflection, refraction or distortion of notional realities.

'Hype' is a much-hyped term, and is equally applicable to nature and art. Much has been made of the hype surrounding Hirst's art, and it is precisely this cultural mechanism that allows us to see the play and parody of ideas. It allows us to acknowledge the capacity of nature-art to turn back on itself and to spark off the kinds of implosion that destabilize established modes of explanation. It forces us to realize that Hirst's art is not about nature at all. It is about the ironic stagings of abstract *ideas* of nature – and the capacity of Western culture to reconfigure nature's reality. If I can splice this thought with the words of Marcus Doel for a moment, it is not the ideology of an over-arching structure of power that manipulates the truth or clarity in nature-art, it is the practice of spin-doctoring, and we can only put a spin on nature-art by releasing it, by discharging its obvious energy.[56]

So, the shock of nature's destruction, which has been endlessly rehearsed through the cultural sign system, is no longer a shock as such. Like Hirst's killer sharks, we have 'mock-shock', the terms and conditions of which are determined by the context of the art, rather than a supposedly authentic human response to something gruesome. Somewhere along the line, nature-art has became abstract and what we are left with are spec-

tral versions of the original. Form and content have been substituted for a networked alternative, a simulacrum, where nature-art signifies Western culture's need for their existence rather than their reality. This in itself forces us to think about nature-art beyond a polarized form of debate and its fake resolutions, clarity and foreclosures. What should remain is a nature-art of alterity and undecidability, where 'difference is no longer differentiation between subjects, but the differentiation between manifestations of the same subject'.[57]

I have tried to use the idea of indifference to generate explanations of nature-art that are *different* from those already given, and that have been all too frequently bound by the constraints of prescriptive and predictable forms of sociocultural analysis. For some time now, Baudrillard has argued for the 'cultivation of indifference', so that we might not succumb to the seduction of 'locating' meaning that putatively reifies social and political modality.[58] For him, this is a positive (albeit fatal) strategy that should, and can only ever, fail because of the impossibility of detachment from explanation itself.[59] But as Rojek and Turner and others have pointed out, it is a strategy that is still worth pursuing because it short-circuits the functioning and utility of enclosed analytical frameworks that merely exist to confirm their existence.[60] We might be sceptical about the argument for strategies of indifference, and more specifically about the tone of Baudrillard's writing.[61] But it allows us to think again about the deception of nature's reality and the limitations of its contemporary explanation.[62]

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sarah Shirley for undertaking important archival work in preparation for the writing of this paper, and Peter Jackson for providing constructive feedback on an early draft. Many thanks to Damien Hirst and 'Science' for allowing me to reproduce *The physical impossibility of death in someone living* and *A thousand years*, and for being continually supportive of this work. Finally, thanks must go to the White Cube Gallery for allowing me to reproduce *Mother and child divided*.

Notes

[1] See e.g. M. Doel, *Poststructuralist geographies: the diabolical art of spatial sciences* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

[2] The art press promoted the term 'Brit Art' after a group of 'Young British Artists' exhibited at a show called *Freeze* in London Docklands in 1988. According to one journalist, the movement was 'fired by pop culture and heavily influenced by punk': F. Gibbons, 'Britart is out of the picture: Turner Prize special report', *Guardian*, 15 June. http://www.guardian.co.uk/turner2000/article/0,2763,332341,00.html (2000). However, the idea of Brit Art appears to have as much to do with the more widespread 'Cool Britannia' reconstruction of national identity in the mid-1990s. As if to dismiss the contemporary relevance of Brit Art, Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Gallery, London, recently declared: 'Young British Artists will be regarded as a phenomenon of the 1990s, not something to continue into the twenty-first century': quoted in Gibbons, 'Britart is out of the picture'.

[3] See P. Macnaghten and J. Urry, *Contested natures* (London, Sage, 1998); B. Braun and N. Castree, eds, *Remaking reality: nature at the millennium* (London, Routledge, 1998); K. Eder, *The social construction of nature* (London, Sage, 1996).

[4] See N. Smith, 'The production of nature', in G. Robertson, M. Marsh, L. Tickner, J. Bird, B. Curtis and T. Putnam, eds, *FutureNatural* (London, Routledge, 1996), pp. 35–54; N. Smith, 'Nature at the millennium: production and re-enchantment', in Braun and Castree, *Remaking reality*, pp. 271–85; C. Katz, 'Whose nature, whose culture?', in Braun and Castree, *Remaking reality*, pp. 46–63; L.M. Benton and J.R. Short, *Environmental discourses and practice* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1999).

[5] See e.g. D. Harvey, *Justice, nature and the geography of difference* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1996); M. Gandy, 'Contradictory modernities: conceptions of nature in the art of Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* **87** (1997), pp. 636–59.

[6] See D. Haraway, *Simians, cyborgs and women: the reinvention of nature* (London, Routledge, 1991); D. Haraway, *'Modest_witness@second_millennium.femaleman©_meets_oncomouse™ feminism and technoscience* (London, Routledge, 1996); S. Whatmore, *Hybrid geographies: natures, cultures, spaces* (London, Sage, 2002).

[7] N. Zurbrugg, introduction: 'Just what is it that makes Baudrillard's ideas so different, so appealing?', in N. Zurbrugg, ed., *Jean Baudrillard, art and artefact* (London, Sage, 1997).

[8] Thrift discusses this issue in relation to non-representational theory, by drawing upon Goodwin's work on organisms and ecosystems: N. Thrift, 'Steps to an ecology of place', in D. Massey, J. Allen and P. Sarre, eds, *Human geography today* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998), pp. 295–322; B.C. Goodwin, *How the leopard changes its spots* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994).

[9] Baudrillard's argument has been sustained through a number of published works in the last ten years, notably *The transparency of evil* (London, Verso, 1993); *The perfect crime* (London, Verso, 1996); 'The end of the millennium or the countdown', *Economy and society* **26** (1997), pp. 47–55; *The consumer society: myths and structures* (London, Sage 1998).

[10] An obvious parallel can be made here with the argument of Deleuze and Guattari that the strength of philosophy lies not in the ability to contest key ideas on their own terms, but in the ability to challenge the very basis on which those ideas are formulated. In short, it allows us to see the capacity of philosophy. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is philosophy?* (London, Verso,1994).

[11] On the tendencies simultaneously to duplicate and perfect nature, see J. Baudrillard, *The illusion of the end* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994).

[12] Deleuze has long argued for this kind of explanation to be worked through the analysis of cultural form. See e.g. G. Deleuze, *The logic of sense* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1990).

[13] N. Serota, quoted in Gibbons, 'Britart is out of the picture'.

[14] See e.g. R. Garnett, 'Beyond the hype', *Art monthly* **195** (1996), pp. 43–4; E. Lucie-Smith, 'Critic's diary', *Art review* **2** (2000), pp. 28–31.

[15] J. Stallabrass, *High art lite: British art in the 1990s* (London, Verso, 1999).

[16] Lucie-Smith, 'Critic's diary'; E. Lucie-Smith, 'It's all about control', *Art review* **5** (1998), pp. 56–7.

[17] D. Hirst, *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now* (London, Booth-Clibborn, 1997); D. Hirst and G. Burns, *On the way to work* (London, Faber & Faber, 2001).

[18] On the subject of Hirst's recent artistic productivity, Adrian Searle claimed: 'The market and the media wants a constant stream of novelties, rather than an increase in creative sophisti-

cation or thoughtfulness': 'The relentless litany of self-abuse', *Guardian*, website archive section, (http://www.guardian.co.uk/archive/article/0,4273,4009247,00.html (2000).

[19] Hirst, *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere*.

[20] M. Collings, *Blimey! from bohemian to britpop: the London artworld from Francis Bacon to Damien Hirst* (Cambridge, 21 Publishing, 1997); *This is modern art* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999); Stallabrass, *High art lite*; C. Freeland, *But is it art? An introduction to art theory* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001)

[21] W. Self, 'A steady iron-hard jet', *Modern painters* (1994), pp. 50–52.

[22] Hirst, quoted in J.D. Veneciano, 'Review of sensations: Young British Artists from the Saatchi collection', *New art examiner* (Feb. 1998), p. 47.

[23] Hirst, quoted in Hirst, 1997. 'Introduction', in Hirst, *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere*.

[24] Stallabrass, *High art lite*.

[25] Hirst, quoted in S. Borusso, 'Interview with Damien Hirst', http://www.marenzi.com/artists/hirst/statement.html (1996).

[26] P. Virilio, *The information bomb* (London, Verso, 2000), p. 28.

[27] C. Jenks, ed., *Visual culture* (London, Routledge, 1995).

[28] Self, 'A steady iron-hard jet'.

[29] B. Sewell, 'Damien Hirst', *Modern painters* (1992) p. 87.

[30] Philo and Wilbert have provided a series of detailed and critical essays on human–animal relationships. The thematically diverse nature of the book highlights the ambiguity of moral, ethical, sacred and profane meanings that are continually rehearsed through human–animal relationships: C. Philo and C. Wilbert, eds, *Animal spaces, beastly places: new geographies of human–animal relations* (London, Routledge, 2000).

[31] Hirst, *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere*.

[32] See W. Cronon, *Uncommon ground: human place in nature* (New York, Norton, 1997).

[33] Visuality has been described as 'distinct, but not opposed to the physical act of seeing, and comprising the technologies that allow us to view the world, and its discursive determinations': H. Foster, ed., *Vision and visuality* (Seattle, Bay Press, 1988), p. ix.

[34] See P. Virilio, *Open sky* (London, Verso, 1997).

[35] Garnett, 'Beyond the hype', p. 43.

[36] T.Gould, 'Pursuing the popular', *Journal of aesthetics and art criticism* **57** (1999), pp. 119–35.

[37] Hirst, *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere*, p. 19.

[38] Quoted in Hirst *Introduction*, no page number.

[39] Hirst, *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere*, p. 23.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 285.

[41] Quoted in Hirst and Burns, *On the way to work*, p. 220.

[42] See N. Thrift, 'The object of nature', *Body and society* **6** (2000), pp. 34–57.

[43] G. Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York, Zone, 1988).

[44] Freeland, *But is it art?*; Stallabrass, *High art lite*.

[45] Zurbrugg, introduction.

[46] A post-structuralist critique of the Eden Project can be found in R. Bartram and S. Shobrook, 'Endless, end-less nature: environmental futures at the fin de millennium', the Millennial edition of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. 90. June (2000) pp. 370–80.

[47] A. Wilson, 'Out of control', *Art monthly* **177** (1994), pp. 3–9.

[48] Quoted in Self, 'A steady iron-hard jet', p. 51.

[49] *Ibid*.

[50] Hirst, *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere*, p. 19.
[51] D. Bowie, '(s)Now', *Modern painters* **9** (1996), pp. 36–9.
[52] R. Millard, 'Champagne Charlies', *Art review* **6** (1998), pp. 50–51; Stallabrass, *High art lite*.
[53] Hirst, quoted on *Life, death and Damien Hirst*, Channel 4 documentary broadcast 28 Dec. 2000.
[54] Interestingly, Baudrillard once acknowledged that contemporary artists were turning to his notion of simulation rather than Derrida's notion of deconstruction, despite Derrida's more focused attention on artistic practices, genre and aesthetics. Baudrillard, quoted in N. Zurbrugg, 'Fractal theory', in M. Gane, ed., *Baudrillard live: selected interviews* (London, Routledge, 1993), p. 166.
[55] See Baudrillard, *The transparency of evil*; *The illusion of the end*; *The perfect crime*.
[56] Doel, *Postructuralist geographies*.
[57] Baudrillard, 'The end of the millennium', p. 47.
[58] J. Baudrillard, *Fatal strategies* (London, Pluto Press, 1990).
[59] *Ibid*.
[60] C. Rojek and B. S. Turner, eds, *Forget Baudrillard?* (London, Routledge, 1993).
[61] Whilst we might think of Baudrillard as an intellectual dandy, or simply as overly declarative, we should perhaps accept him on his own terms, as provocateur. Baudrillard's views on this matter are clearly expressed in M. Arnaud and M. Gane, 'Baudrillard: the interview', in Gane, *Baudrillard live*, pp. 199–207. For critiques of Baudrillard see e.g. A. Callinicos, *Against postmodernism: a Marxist approach*, (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1990); H. Bertens, *The idea of the postmodern: a history* (London, Routledge, 1995); C. Levin, *Jean Baudrillard: a study in cultural metaphysics* (London, Prentice Hall, 1996).
[62] See Baudrillard, *The transparency of evil* (London, Verso 1993); *The illusion of the end*; *The perfect crime*.